Errors and social identity threat

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Chapter 2

Project risk as identity threat: Explaining the development and consequences of risk discourse in an infrastructure project[4]

This chapter explores the role of social identity threat in risk discourse in an infrastructure project, and the consequences risk discourse has for cooperation between stakeholders. We show that risks posed a threat to the identity of the project team, resulting in a discourse focused on attributing responsibility for risks to outsiders and that polarized their relations with stakeholders. Consequently, the project team tried to eliminate risk by withholding information from the stakeholders they regarded responsible for inflicting risks on the project. This exacerbated intergroup relations and led to conflict. Given that social identity processes affect the way stakeholders discuss and handle risks, these findings are relevant for the design of risk management systems in projects.

[4] This chapter is based on Van Os, A., Van Berkel, F., De Gilder, D., Van Dyck, C., & Groenewegen, P. "Project risk as identity threat: Explaining the development and consequences of risk discourse in an infrastructure project." *Accepted with minor revisions by International Journal of Project Management.*

Cost escalation happens in roughly nine out of ten transport infrastructure projects and actual project costs are on average 28% higher than estimated (e.g., Flyvbjerg, Skamris, & Buhl, 2003, p. 640). Delays in schedule are also frequent, resulting in a negative evaluation of project delivery (Kaliba, Muya, & Mumba, 2009). In this context, risk management is often seen as crucial for project success, because it fosters control over events or situations that may threaten a project (De Bakker, Boonstra, & Wortmann, 2011). However, most literature on risk management views project risk as a given and pays no attention to how actors subjectively and interactively construct what risk means in a specific social context (Clarke & Short, 1993; Gephart, Van Maanen, & Oberlechner, 2009; Stallings, 1990). By understanding risk construction in complex real-life projects we can assess how the actors themselves partly shape the concept of risk, and how this might lead to problems in project execution.

This chapter examines the role social identity plays in the emergence of risk discourse in a complex infrastructure project and what consequences that discourse has on stakeholder cooperation. Two characteristics of this case make it suitable for examination. First, members identified strongly with their project team and resisted interference from other stakeholders. When a new member joined the team at an advanced stage of the project, this became especially tangible. Second, risks were a ‘hot topic’ in this project; there was an ongoing risk discourse. The term discourse refers to the way people talk about a phenomenon (e.g., risk) in actual conversations (Whittle & Mueller, 2011). Our focus is on risk discourse inside a project team and in contrast with other stakeholders in the project.

To understand why groups talk about risks in a certain way, we use Social Identity Theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which provides a fundamental insight into the way social context affects human

cognition, emotion, and behavior. Specifically, we incorporate the notion that when a source of identity is threatened, people can actively resist the threat (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007; Blanz et al., 1998; Petriglieri, 2011). For instance, when groups feel their identity is threatened they may close ranks, become defensive and even hostile toward other groups (Branscombe et al., 2001) to the detriment of intergroup cooperation. Because project success depends largely on the quality of cooperation between groups (Klijn & Teisman, 2003), the concept of identity threat is highly relevant to project management.

Research on the social construction of risk in project management (Zhang, 2011) showed that views on—and descriptions of—risk differ among stakeholders. Variations are based on differences in knowledge, expertise, roles and responsibilities, and interests (Keil, Tiwana, & Bush, 2002; Lim, Sia, & Yeow, 2011). Whereas these studies merely described the social processes involved in the construction of risk, our study aims to provide thorough insight into the reasons why risks in particular contexts are so sensitive and dealing with them can become such a problem. We expect that when a complex project entails severe political risks (identified as secondary risks), project risks not only threaten the goals of a project, but also present a threat to the social identity of the project team. This in turn influences the way risks are discussed and treated in a project, and the way stakeholders cooperate with one another. For instance, although risk-avoiding behavior among (public and private) project partners has been described earlier (Koppenjan, 2005), this chapter amends the prevailing view of risk in the project management literature (Lehtiranta, 2014) by showing more clearly that risk-avoiding behavior may result from the relationship between identity threat and risk discourse.

Risk and identity threat

In the project management literature, risks are predominantly perceived as threats to project goals (e.g., Hartono, Sulistyo, Praftiwi, & Hasmoro, 2014). As such, project organizations strive to manage, mitigate, and preferably eliminate risks (Lehtiranta, 2014). Difficulties in attaining project goals are easily associated with poor risk management, which can threaten the confidence and self-esteem of project team members. Because people do not want to be associated with things they consider negative, they will strive to ward off the association between a group they identify with (e.g., the project team) and the negative characteristic (e.g., project risk). To clarify this argument we use the concept of social identity threat.

A central principle of Social Identity Theory (SIT) is that when people identify with a group (their ingroup), they are motivated to uphold a positive view of that group (Tajfel, 1982). When membership of a group is meaningful to a person, this shapes his or her social identity, which can be threatened in various ways, such as intergroup conflict (Branscombe et al., 2001) or negative stereotypes others have of the ingroup (Petriglieri, 2011). We define social identity threat as possible damage to the value, meaning, and/or enactment of group identity (cf. Petriglieri, 2011). This chapter focuses on threat to the value of a group's identity, which constitutes the possibility that a source of identity will be less valuable in the future.

Group members are not passive receivers of threat; they are motivated to mitigate or eliminate identity threat, and employ several strategies to do so. If it is impossible to change the actual position of the ingroup, people can resort to a cognitive coping strategy, for instance by emphasizing some more flattering characteristic of their group or by comparing the group with another one lower in status (Blanz et al., 1998).

When it is possible to change the position, ingroups can become hostile or directly retaliate against outgroups (Blanz et al., 1998; Fischer et al., 2010).

Our first research question pertains to these possible responses to identity threat. Specifically, we are interested in how the project team responds to the identity threat associated with risks by talking about these risks in a certain way. To answer this question, a useful point of departure is the notion that people and groups can have different views on what constitutes an important project risk (Keil et al., 2002; Lim et al., 2011). For instance, a study on an IT project showed that a strict division of roles and responsibilities between groups resulted in irreconcilable interests and a fragmented view of risks (Lim et al., 2011). This group-specific risk perception led to severe crises in the project. One of the reasons for this was the fact that certain risks were not part of the shared view of risks as they had not been recognized in time. Furthermore, when project managers and users had to categorize risks in an IT project, they identified the risk that the other party was responsible for as the most important (Keil et al., 2002).

Interestingly, this second study not only considered that groups have differing views on risks, but also that they attribute responsibility for risks to different actors and groups. Responsibility attribution is well-known in social psychological research (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980) and social role is an important factor in the process. Individuals base their attribution of responsibility not only on what a person has actually done, but also on their expectations derived from the social role of that person (Hamilton, 1978). The organizational setting also needs consideration to understand how responsibility is attributed (Gailey & Lee, 2005). For instance, members in leadership roles are given more responsibility (Gibson & Schroeder, 2003). Responsibility attribution can also take place when individuals or groups want to divert attention away from their own actions; in this sense, it can be

opportunistic or strategic.

Responsibility for risks in the context of project management has been studied extensively (for a review, see Lehtiranta, 2014). It has been established that parties in (infrastructure) projects have different perceptions of the importance of risks and who is—or should be—responsible (Andi, 2006; Rahman & Kumaraswamy, 2002). However, these studies focus on the result of discursive processes: the official, contractual allocation of responsibilities for risks. Exploring the process of responsibility attribution in action, during actual conversations, promises insights into the complex process. Language can subtly (Wigboldus, Spears, & Semin, 1999) or blatantly (Ladegaard, 2011) express the relative positions, relationships between, and feelings toward other groups. Moreover, people use language to position their group more positively, which can help them ward off identity threat.

Risk discourse also bears upon stakeholder cooperation. Earlier, we argued that in response to identity threat, people can attribute responsibility for risks to actors outside the ingroup. A shared identity contributes to information sharing, coordinated action, cooperation, and helping behavior (Ashforth et al., 2008). In contrast, the presence of a threatening outgroup can lead to hostility and intergroup conflict (Brewer, 1999). With regard to intergroup interactions, attributing responsibility to others strengthens the perception of them as outgroup members. SIT research explains the consequences of intergroup processes. First, communication between groups deteriorates because information from outgroup members is perceived as less convincing than ingroup information (Esposo, Hornsey, & Spoor, 2013). Second, people are more defensive against criticism from outgroup members (Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002) and, finally, people are less inclined to share information with outgroup members (Wittenbaum, Hollingshead, &

Botero, 2004). This suggests that stressing the distinctions between groups by attributing responsibility to others in risk discourse is negatively associated with the quality of cooperation between groups. Project "Underwater" (code name) has several traits that make it relevant for studying such processes, which we discuss in the next section.

Case description and research methods

Case description

Project Underwater was run by a temporary team of members from several organizations; a "multi-disciplinary composition of participants employed by independent firms" (Lehtiranta, 2014, p. 640). Both temporality and multidisciplinarity may cause problems for cooperation on the team. Nevertheless, members usually work toward a shared goal: the successful completion of a project, which enhances the motivation to work together and to learn from mistakes along the way (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). This can create a strong team identity and thus affect the interaction between the project team and its environment.

In this study, we draw a distinction between the project team (the temporary organization responsible for organizing the project) and other stakeholders around the team. We define stakeholders as "individuals or organizations that are either affected by or affect the development of the project" (El-Gohary, Osman, & El-Diraby, 2006, p. 595), thereby distinguishing three stakeholder groups (cf. Davis, 2014): senior management, the project team, and project recipients such as citizens. In this chapter, we exclude project recipients from our analysis. We focus on the project team, consisting of employees of public and private organizations with a strong emphasis on engineers. The project team coordinated the

activities of the contractors, managed the project contracts, and had to deal with senior management, including the Municipal Service of Infrastructure (MIS), the Municipal Service of Construction Inspection (MSCI), and the alderman (top level of the municipality). Figure 2.1 gives an overview of the most important stakeholders in the project.

Risks were a big issue in Project Underwater because the MIS, responsible for planning and executing the project, was under heightened scrutiny because of high-impact accidents and failure in previous projects. For the MIS to show that they were capable of executing and controlling large complex infrastructure projects, it was especially important for the project to be successful. Local politics were watching eagerly, as during the renovation of the tunnel, one of the main traffic arteries in the city would be closed to traffic. If the renovation project was delayed, the tunnel would need to close longer than the announced two summer months, which would stir media attention and endanger the positions of several political actors. In short, all stakeholders considered the success of Project Underwater to be crucial and wanted the project to run as smoothly as possible.

The problematic history, combined with the political sensitivity, prompted a reorganization of the MIS. A new principal and an extra project manager in charge of construction were assigned with the explicit task to strengthen control over the project. Thereafter, most project meetings in the rest of the preparation phase were on resolving conflicts between the new appointees and the project team.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected as part of a larger study on cooperation in the municipal infrastructure service. The second author was a participant observer in the project organization for eight months. He attended 30 project

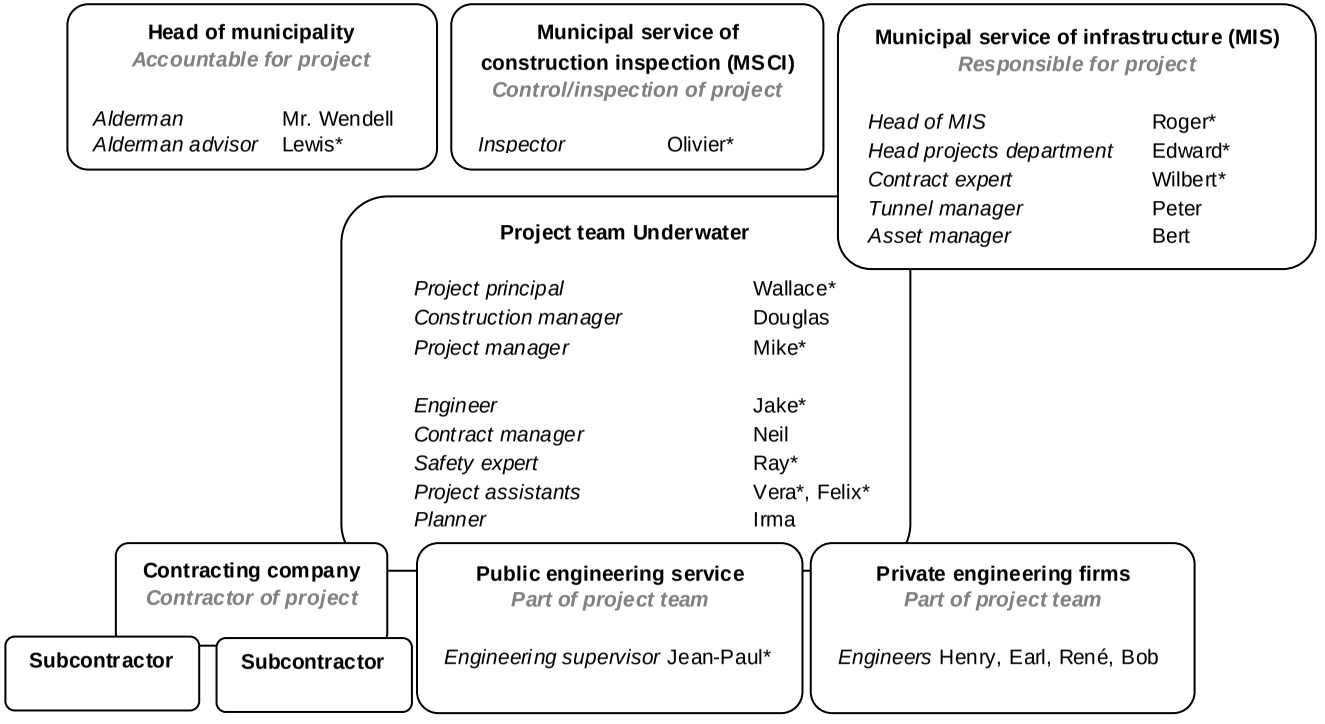

Figure 2.1. *Overview of the primary organizational groups and actors involved in Project Underwater*
Notes: The text in grey shows the role the organizational groups have within project Underwater. Actors with an asterisk (*) have been interviewed. A greater overlap with the box of the project team represents greater involvement in the project.

meetings that were tape-recorded and transcribed with the consent of the project participants. Together, we both conducted 14 formal, semi-structured interviews with members of the project team and several other stakeholders, in the final stage of preparation and during project execution. This enabled us to combine the insider's perspective (second author) with the outsider's perspective (first author).

Our semi-structured interviews used a method similar to the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) aimed at gathering detailed information on the activities or events an interviewee has encountered. We asked interviewees what they thought were the most significant incidents and problems throughout the project, why incidents and problems occurred, and how they expected the project would proceed. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The goal of the data analysis was to uncover risk discourse used by project participants at project meetings and in the interviews. Combining observation and interview data allowed us to corroborate findings from both types of empirical material and gave a process view of the discourse. Because the social construction of meaning largely takes place through interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), studying discourse is a suitable way of understanding the meanings people give to risk (Zinn, 2010). We analyzed the material using tools developed in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby the material to be analyzed was delimited by our focus on risk. This means that we systematically analyzed small units of our data in episodes when risks were discussed, which gradually led to a categorization of the data, resulting in a description of the risk discourse.

First, we identified initial themes from the 14 interviews by coding the interviews in their entirety, using the computer software MAXQDA. Starting with interview analysis gave us the opportunity to study the way

participants looked back on an eventful period and to identify the most important themes they associated with the project. After initially coding the interviews, we revised the coding scheme by comparing quotes within and between the different codes and re-organizing them into main and sub codes to improve the structure and clarity of the list.

Our next step was to systematically examine all data, including project meetings, zooming in on the concept of risk to gain a preliminary overview of how often actors talked about it. We used the MAXQDA word count function to identify the words used most often in all the data. The term risk[5] appeared 310 times, which was similar to the frequencies of common words such as "really," "say," or "with," underlining the prominence of the term in the material. We then let MAXQDA automatically code all paragraphs that contained the word risk. This served as the basis for our interpretive analysis.

In the final stage of our analysis, the first author revisited the automatically coded data and recoded these into categories that represented patterns in the way project actors talked about risk. This resulted in a preliminary analysis that we discussed at length. When differences in interpretation of the data occurred, for instance regarding the typology of risks, we discussed alternatives until we agreed that the essence of the data had been captured.

Risk discourse and cooperation in Project Underwater

The results consist of three parts. The first part introduces the most prominent types of risk, the associated actors, and the links between the risk

[5] This study was conducted in Dutch. Therefore we included instances where 'risk' belonged to a longer term (e.g., 'risk management') as in Dutch, compounds are often written as one word, (e.g., 'risicomanagement').

types. The second part shows how the issues of responsibility and blame arose in Project Underwater risk discourse; specifically how the attributed responsibility for types of risk to various actors and groups caused intergroup relations to deteriorate. Part three analyzes the consequences for intergroup cooperation. Specifically, we show how certain actors and groups' attempts to mitigate the influence of risk led to conflict and the withholding of information. Because expressions of identity threat are evident throughout the data, we only emphasize the indications of identity threat when they arise in the presented quotes.

The interconnectedness of risks and actors in Project Underwater

At the start of Project Underwater, the failures of previous projects had marred the image of the MIS to the extent that the media called it the "blundering service," mostly as a joke, but with a serious undertone. The project team was constantly scrutinized. Everyone on the team was aware that problems surfacing in Project Underwater would spread beyond its limits. For one thing, Project Underwater was part of a larger renovation project, planned to renovate three tunnels in the city. Project manager Mike discussed the Project Underwater context at a meeting in May:

> *Of course, we're only looking at Project Underwater. But the municipality's concern goes beyond it. We have three tunnels that need fixing. It's turning into a quite a worry file. […] It's a risky project and MIS has a bad reputation…* Mike, project meeting May

Mike refers to the fact that Project Underwater was not the sole concern of the municipality; its inclusion in a larger project and in the MIS

was also important. There was a certain risk hierarchy: primary risks directly linked to the project, and secondary risks relating the project to its environment. Our analysis of all quotes identified three types of primary risk. The first was a technical risk related to the technical requirements of the tunnel. If the requirements were not met, there could be no guarantee of safety, which meant the project might not get a permit from the MSCI to carry out the construction plans. The second risk was to planning. It was crucial not to exceed the two months reserved for execution. The third was finances: if the project exceeded its budget, the shortfall would be taken from another tunnel renovation project. Table 2.1 gives sample quotes on the different types of risk.

Table 2.1. *Types of project risk and their interrelations as expressed in discourse*

Irma: ***Organizational risks*** *have come up. Some supervision plans have not taken shape yet.* Mike: *I thought the intention was to focus on* ***technical risks***? Irma: *If the execution team doesn't manage things well, this puts* ***the eight weeks in danger***. Project meeting, March
Mike: *The* ***planning*** *aspect is a risk. Then there's the* ***safety requirement****. And* ***money*** *aspects*. Project meeting, May
Felix*: Wallace was of course very focused on the* ***political sensitivity****, the position of the alderman, […] I get that. Our motive was* ***tunnel safety****, the* ***authorities****, the* ***MSCI****, and* ***finances*** *and stuff. Like, is it good what we're building? Will it not cost our citizens… because we also have to spend the taxpayers' money responsibly*. Interview, July
Jean-Paul: *People only look at the funnel from top-down, from the alderman: we have to do it like this. Nobody looks at what the preconditions are.* ***Technically****? Can we keep the project under control* ***financially****?* Interview, June

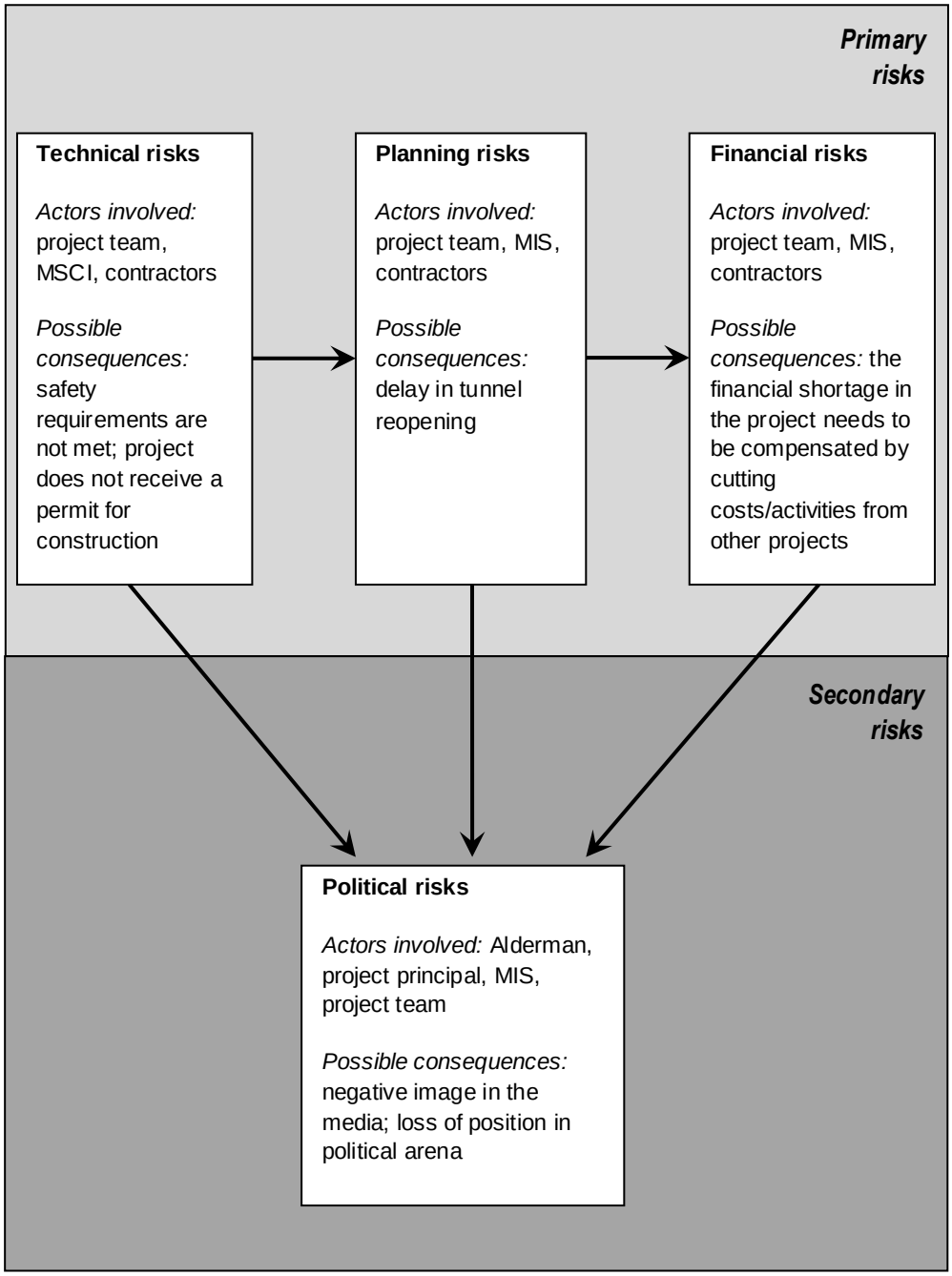

Figure 2.2. *Risks, actors, consequences, and their interrelations in Project Underwater*

Figure 2.2 shows an overview of the primary risks, their consequences, and the actors involved. The primary risks arising in the project were sensitive issues particularly because they not merely risked the success of the project, but also led to a secondary political risk. They put in danger the reputation and positions of groups and actors, especially the MIS and the alderman in charge of the MIS in danger. Mike expressed the political risk at a project meeting in March.

> *People can get the idea that the project doesn't have its risks under control […] and the image of the MIS is at stake as well.* Mike, project meeting March

These three risks could lead to political risk in several ways. For instance, if the project did not get an execution permit (technical risk), the project would fail even before it started. This would add to the bad reputation of the MIS and endanger the alderman's position (political risk). This would also happen if the tunnel did not reopen as scheduled (planning risk), or if the project exceeded its budget to the extent that other projects would suffer (financial risk). The assistant project manager spoke about the interrelation between risks:

> *It gives me a really weird feeling, the idea that we're building something now and find out if it works only later: we'll press the button, and it won't do what we want it to do. That would be such a shame. All the trouble it would cause. […] The aftermath would really be the final blow for the MIS. That's the risk I see.* Felix, interview July

Felix talks about the danger that planned construction will not have the desired result. He means tunnel safety, which could lead to a time risk (the tunnel might not reopen in time) and a financial risk of having to repair possible damage to the tunnel systems. But the crucial element for the MIS is the vulnerable position ("the final blow"), if the project did not work as planned. This political risk occupied the project team and stakeholders strongly throughout the preparation phase.

In general, because of the interrelatedness of primary and secondary risks as a consequence of the history of the MIS, managing these risks became a highly complex endeavor. The safety expert in the project team compared the complexity to a game of chess:

> *You try to reduce your financial risk, but then at some point, you're increasing the risk of your project as a whole, so the risk of not getting a permit. And […] then your political risk also increases. They're all different types of risks; it's like a really big game of chess.* Ray, interview June

In the midst of this complexity and sensitivity, the project team felt threatened by pressure from outsiders. In a vulnerable position, not only afraid that the project would fail, they were worried that their identity as a project team would be endangered. Articulations of this identity threat by project team members included anticipating coming under attack (Mike: "There will be actions against our team," project meeting, March), and becoming overpowered by outsiders such as the new project principal and construction manager (Henry, to Mike: "Before you know it, you'll be sidelined," project meeting, May).

Risk attribution and deterioration of relationships

The complexity, sensitivity, and identity threat related to risks described in the previous section shaped the risk discourse profoundly. Risk was strongly associated with responsibility and blame connected to specific actors and groups. Our analysis of risk attribution to groups or people identified three main stakeholders strongly associated with risk: the project team, Wallace, the project principal, and the MSCI. Table 2.2 is an overview of sample quotes of actors associated with risks.

Table 2.2. *Examples of attribution of risks to actors in Project Underwater*

Risk attributed to	Examples of risk discourse
Project principal	Jake: *I do want to give a powerful signal to Wallace. Because of this whole situation we lose two weeks, minimum. This isn't maintaining the status quo. We have an increased risk profile now. It's taken us an enormous amount of time and energy*. Project meeting, May
	Jean-Paul: *Where it really goes wrong, and I think it's the principal's fault, is that he's only busy with how things should go and he's not open to all the real risks and dangers. That's a real problem*. Interview, June
	Mike: *We felt that he inflicted risks on the project by keeping the people from doing their jobs […] So we thought that in terms of time our project became even more risky! The risks only got higher and higher and higher […] Jake still says there's only one person here who introduced the really big risks, the real risks, and that's Wallace*. Interview, June
MSCI	Mike: *We just need to see this through. Otherwise they [MSCI] will be passive again, they excel at doing that. That's a risk for our project*. Project meeting, May
Project team	Wallace: *A good project team takes a client by the collar and says, "This is how we're gonna do it." I didn't feel this and I think that's a risk. It's the attitude problem.* Project meeting, April

Outside the project team, actors ascribed the risks to the project team and were critical of the way the team handled difficult issues. Members of the project team, in contrast, shifted responsibility away from their team. Attributing risk responsibility to actors outside the team strengthened the shared identity of the members. This stronger identity increased the team's opposition against the interference from external stakeholders, as we will show in the next sections.

On the project team, there was an understanding that stakeholders in their environment were concerned with the performance of the project and in effect saw Project Underwater as a source of risk. This concern was strongly related to the political consequences that could emanate from problems in Project Underwater. Project manager Mike expressed this in the following way:

> *How would our blundering service be capable of finishing a complicated project like this within eight weeks, that's impossible, right? So then you have the administrative department that sees this as a risk too, and then you have the department of communication around the alderman that sees it as a risk as well.* Mike, interview June

Here Mike states that project stakeholders were not convinced that the project team was capable of meeting the deadlines. They might have to communicate the (possible) failure to hit the eight-week timeslot, potentially damaging the reputation of the alderman. Besides associating the project team with planning and political risks, outside stakeholders criticized the MIS for the way the project team handled its risks. And even the MIS was suspicious of the way the project team dealt with risk. People questioned

their ability to identify and manage risks adequately.

> *The top risk of the project, namely, will it all be technically in order so that in the end, after completion, we have a safety system that works and lives up to all requirements… That risk, from what I see, is insufficiently managed.* Edward, interview June

Subsequently, when stakeholders around Project Underwater (especially those closely involved in the secondary political risk) felt that the project team was not managing risks well, they started intervening in the project. The introduction of a new project principal, Wallace, in March was one of the most prominent instances of intervention. Wallace forced the team to demonstrate that they were in control of the risks, demanding overviews of their risk management system and in project meetings, asking about the major risks:

> Wallace: *What are the biggest risks in diverting from the planning?*
> Neil: *The limited time we have for execution. If anything at all comes in between, it becomes a problem pretty quickly. Also, if we get trouble from outside, you almost immediately have a risk.* Project meeting April

As Neil mentions here, the two main risk sources were "time" and "outside," of which the latter is indicative of the difficult relation between the project team and the stakeholders around the project who, in the view of the project team, imposed risks on the project. There is some irony in the

fact Neil mentions the risk of time to Wallace, because Wallace's presence meant that the team had to spend more time showing their grasp of risks, which was (according to the project team) time better spent on planning the actual project. This caused immense resistance from the team members, who in the end attributed the increased planning and technical risks to Wallace's interventions:

> *Because of all of his [Wallace's] actions we're flung into completely different directions. The relationship with the contractor has changed dramatically. So the risk that the project will fail is much bigger now than it would've been if they'd just let us do our thing.* Felix, project meeting May, Wallace absent

The final group associated with risk was the MSCI. In the eyes of the project team, this municipal service brought in a planning risk because it had the power to decline permits for the execution of the project, based on safety restrictions, and that could lead to delays in the planning of the project. In an interview, the assistant project manager looks back on the project team's view of the MSCI during the preparation of the construction permits.

> *For tunnel safety, we saw a big problem with the MSCI, because the MSCI grants us the permit […] And they have the power to obstruct progress and shut down the construction work, so that's a big risk we saw coming.* Felix, interview July

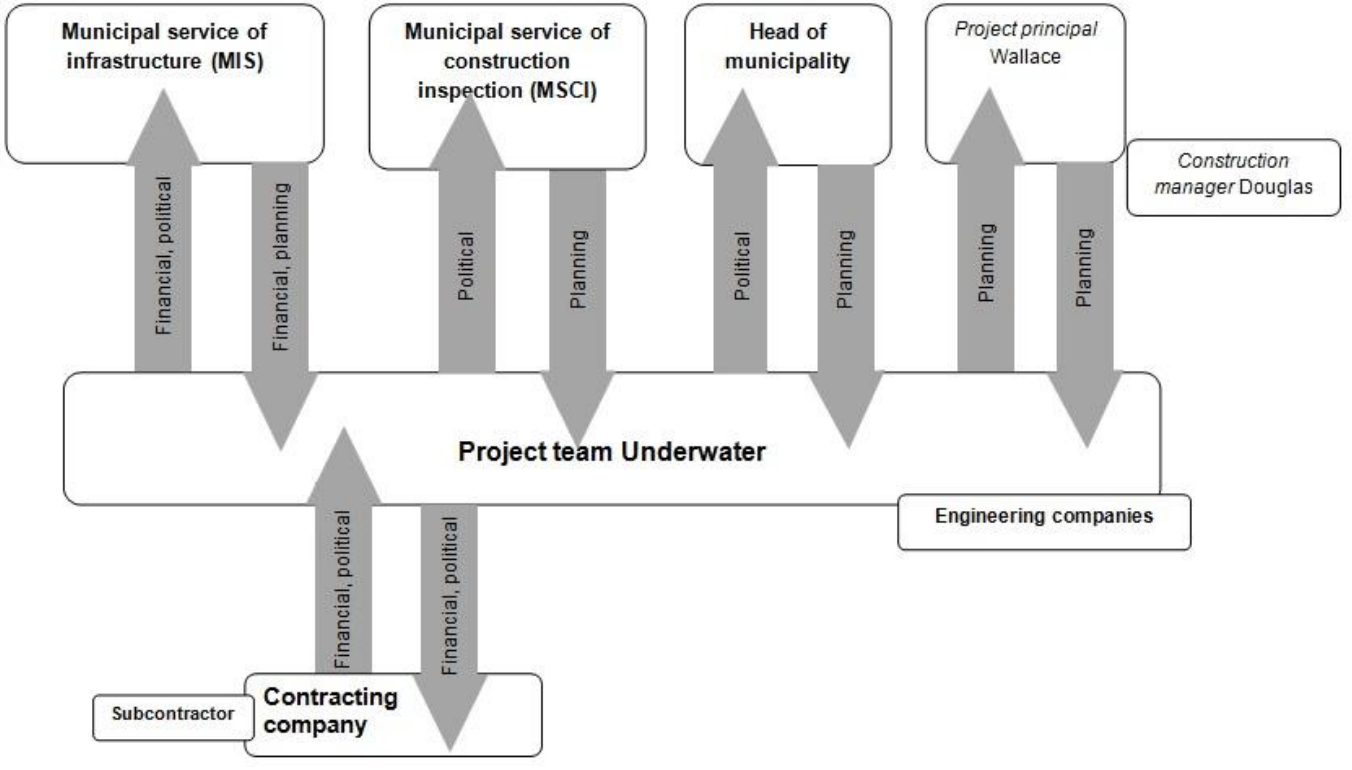

Figure 2.3. *Stakeholders, sources of risks, and polarized intergroup relations in Project Underwater (grey arrows represent sources and types of risk*)

In sum, stakeholders saw the project team as a source of both primary and secondary risk and intervened in the project organization by introducing a new project principal, Wallace. The project team, in turn, started attributing responsibility for risk to the intervening stakeholders. By attributing risk to outsiders, members of the project team strengthened their group identity and set themselves opposed to actors regarded as a risk, most notably project principal Wallace.

> *That's my big objection against the project principal; he increased the risks instead of reducing them.* Ray, interview June

Whereas Wallace was officially on the project team, he and the extra project manager (Douglas) were viewed as outsiders. Figure 2.3 visualizes the increased psychological distance between stakeholders, and the attribution of responsibility for risks to other stakeholders.

To relate discourse to consequences for work practices, we need to look at the cooperation between the project team and other stakeholders. Since such a large part of the risk discourse dealt with one problem (an unsafe tunnel section), we will go on to discuss how it reveals the problematic relationships between stakeholders.

Withholding information and conflict in project Underwater

One issue occupying the project team to a great extent throughout the project was a tunnel section that was in danger of collapsing in case of fire. This issue had been signaled some months before, but at that time had been considered a minor issue not in need of further attention. During the course of our data collection period, it turned out to be a major issue and a

main source of risk to the whole project, causing significant commotion amongst all stakeholders. The discourse and actions from project team members as well as from stakeholders around Project Underwater regarding this specific issue show how intergroup processes shape risk-related cooperation. We zoom in on two elements of problematic intergroup cooperation related to risk: withholding information and conflict. Table 2.3 shows sample quotes of these two elements.

Table 2.3. *Examples of conflict and withholding of information*

Conflict	Douglas: *It's clear: we talk with the tunnel manager via Wallace.* Bob: *You act like it's clear, but it hasn't been at all clear for the past half year, damn it! [strikes fist on table]* Project meeting, May Felix: *And then Wallace came along, and at one point we decided to choose a very risky option [regarding the renovation of the tunnel section] which is now being executed. But in that process, lots of people were passed over or not brought along, and that changed the organization and cooperation from something you've worked toward with each other, to something that was more delicate, any way you looked at it.* Interview, July
With-holding information	Mike (about the MSCI): *If you tell them this beforehand, then they have no choice but to take it into account and not grant us the permit. Then they can't put through the permit anymore. I'd say, keep going with the permit in this way. They can always decide to intervene. Don't let their own procedures get in their way.* Project meeting, March Mike: *We followed the strategy like nothing's going on. We need to think about communication with the MSCI […] We still need to find a good way to communicate this. So it's very exciting.* Project meeting, March Jake: *Then some troubling matters came up, but the contract was already on the way of course. You get to a point where you think, this is very tricky, but you haven't sorted out everything in detail. You realize that it will change the project tremendously if you have to change this. The contract was already on the market back then. Are you gonna disturb the process? If you do, then you're not gonna do the construction in the summer.* Interview, June

Withholding information. Tunnel section three was identified early on in the project as one of the major specific project risks and continued to have this status for the remainder of the preparation phase. Calculations had to be made to determine the exact nature of the risk and the best options for handling it. Mike described the issue itself as well as tactical reasons for not bringing the information about the issue out in the open right away.

> *Then there's still the risk of section three. […] The construction of the roof cannot handle the heat and change in temperature [in case of a fire]. Concrete slabs will fall down. You don't want to go in there with a fire truck when that happens. […] I want to be absolutely certain that everything's correct now, before I bring out the information. Before we get the whole mess all over us.* Mike, project meeting March, Wallace absent

This quote shows resistance against informing actors around the project team about potential risks to the project. This resistance was also visible in the relationship between the project team and project principal Wallace. After only a few weeks of acting as project principal, Wallace expressed the intention to postpone the tunnel renovation for a year, because of the limited information he was able to retrieve from the project team about risks.

> *I said: "I want to quit. I don't trust it. I don't get to see any management documents. There's no regular reporting form. I don't see any risk documents and if I see them then they're inaccurate."* Wallace, interview June

> *One of the things he said was "I advise to quit the project," and that's really been a false start. Because I think we all felt pretty attacked […] So that really contributed to us not liking him very much, collectively, and that we've been quite reserved […] We didn't get him at all, and I think he didn't get us so well either.* Vera, interview June

Vera refers explicitly to the identity threat that Wallace represented for the project team, and the collective response of the team towards him, which resulted in a deterioration of cooperation between Wallace and the project team. Because the team saw Wallace as a source of risk and risks were threatening to the identity of the project team, the team was reluctant to answer to his requests for information. We interpret this as an effort to ward off interference: by limiting the information given to Wallace, the project team hoped to be able to execute its tasks as it had done before and stick to the original planning. Any deviation from that planning was unwelcome because it increased the chance of delays in the project (planning risk). Withholding information from Wallace, even though in reality this was not always possible or beneficial, might then seem like an effective way to limit external influences.

Cooperation with the MSCI was also complicated. From the earlier quote by Mike we could already deduce that the project team made the deliberate decision to be very careful about what information to communicate to the outside world. This was especially the case with regard to the MSCI, because informing them of changes in plans would mean that agreements would have to be altered, and that the chance of not getting a permit, i.e., the technical risk, would increase. In the view of the project team, it was therefore better to stay quiet, in order to "not let their [MSCI's]

own procedures get in their way" (Mike, project meeting March). Earl expresses this view as follows:

> *Maybe we shouldn't inform them until we start with the critical installations. This is a constant risk, since they often give us a hard time. Time and time again, we have to think about whether to inform them or not.* Earl, project meeting March, Wallace absent

These actions of withholding information did not go unnoticed by the MSCI, who saw it as a recurring pattern of the MIS to hide important information and wait until the very last minute to inform other stakeholders of relevant information:

> *Two weeks before the start of the renovation, Wallace comes with the story: "we need to do everything differently, because we found out that the ventilation canal in section three is wobbly and could fall down just like that in case of a calamity." And then you can't believe your ears: what happened here? Finally, after lots of pushing and shoving, we get the documents that are necessary, and then it turns out that these reports of section three, they were there in January already. So we're just being fooled! And that is bad for work relations, bad for mutual trust. What I think is the tactic behind it: "the MSCI only gives you trouble, so we should try to keep them outside the door for as long as possible, and we create an urgency, and then they have no other choice but to cooperate."* Olivier (MSCI), interview August

Olivier described that the attitude of the project team towards the MSCI was that it constituted a danger to project progress. The team perceived the environment as a source of risk and consequently avoided to share certain sensitive information with those parties, in order to protect the project schedule. Nevertheless, efforts to withhold information proved to be futile in the end, and effectively jeopardized the project even further.

Conflict between stakeholders. Other detrimental consequences of withholding information were that it made stakeholders suspicious and angry, and it raised the level of conflict between groups. One source of conflict was the open disagreement over the priority of risk in the project. Whereas the project team recognized that risks needed to be managed, they did not always agree with other actors, such as project principal Wallace, on the necessity of eliminating risk:

> Wallace: *Isn't there something better, more effective and less risky than what's been thought of at this point?* […]
> Jake: *But how far should you go in managing and excluding risks*? Project meeting April

When Wallace was appointed in April, one of the first pressing issues was how to proceed with the problems around tunnel section three. Wallace openly criticized the way the project team was handling the problems and questioned their risk management strategy. At the same time, the project team was critical of Wallace's approach as project principal, causing conflicts between the two parties with regard to what constitutes acceptable risk:

> Wallace: *Why not think of scenarios first and then decide what to throw overboard?*
> Jake: *But that means that what we're doing now isn't right. We accepted a certain risk profile and you apparently don't.*
> Project meeting April

There was a strong resistance to Wallace's increasing influence. He had taken over the position of the original project manager and even appointed a construction manager, Douglas, who had become responsible for all the construction decisions. In the following extract from a project meeting, one of the engineers warns Mike about Wallace and Douglas's influence on the positions of several project team members:

> *Wallace decides what happens and Douglas follows Wallace. You're here as a mere formality, because you have to be here. But these men decide how the project will go. People don't listen to engineers anymore, because they're annoying and they thwart progress.* Henry (directed at Mike), project meeting May, Wallace absent

The feeling that Wallace and Douglas took action that would influence the project planning, even without consulting the project team, deteriorated the relations between the team and Wallace and Douglas. At the same time the conflict strengthened the identity of the project team and the occupational groups within it. The problematic relationship became particularly clear in Wallace's choice of an option for the renovation of tunnel section three. This decision deviated unexpectedly from an option that the engineers had previously agreed upon, which made project team

members feel ignored and not taken seriously. Assistant project manager Felix touched upon this issue in a project meeting shortly after Wallace had made the decision.

> *Our big question is really: what happened between Wednesday and Friday that made this happen? The solution that Douglas summarized in his e-mail from Friday and Wallace's decision [on Wednesday] led to some questions and comments from the people who worked on it, technically and in terms of safety regulations.* Felix, project meeting May, Wallace absent

Although Felix is being subtle here, the tense atmosphere of the meeting and comments made later on in the project (see Table 2.2) show that this issue was a great source of identity threat, particularly to the engineers on the team, which caused further unwillingness to work together to resolve problems.

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings show how intergroup relations deteriorated when actors shifted the risk discourse to attributing responsibility to other stakeholders. Because risks constituted a threat to identity, the project team wanted to avoid being associated with the responsibility for risks. The way risks were attributed to others had a great impact on the relationship between groups and consequently the project team developed into a tightly knit group that avoided interference from other stakeholders. The marked deterioration of intergroup relations became acute when Wallace was appointed.

Relationships between stakeholders grew increasingly adversarial as the project team withheld information from Wallace and the MSCI, and the intergroup conflict became more pronounced.

This study provided a theoretical grounding for the reason why groups construct risk in a certain way and explored the consequences of risk discourse for stakeholder cooperation. Social identity threat stimulated the project team to attribute responsibility for risks to outside stakeholders and thus shaped the risk discourse over time. Circumstances in the project context (i.e., the MIS's history of past failures) added a secondary layer of political risk to the primary risks. In Project Underwater, the risk discourse led to the perception that stakeholders represented causes of risk and therefore needed to be warded off. Consequently, Wallace's entrance as a new project principal for team was not easily accepted. This corresponds with research showing that the climate in a team is of great importance for the acceptance of newcomers: teams that regard complex unpredictable situations (e.g., risks) as a positive challenge are more accepting of newcomers than teams that primarily focus on preventing these situations (Rink & Ellemers, 2009), as was the case in Project Underwater. The project team viewed Wallace as an outgroup member who increased the risk to project planning, which further shaped the risk discourse.

Social identity threat is also relevant when trying to understand the impact of a risk discourse on cooperation between stakeholders. In coupling the primary and secondary risks, the project team's risk discourse strongly emphasized attributing responsibility to outside actors. Hence, they engaged in actions aimed at protecting the ingroup from external intrusion. The primary action was withholding information from Wallace and the MSCI. Here it is interesting to note that although some literature asserts that when newcomers actively request information they are seen as more involved and

are therefore more accepted into the team (Burke, Kraut, & Joyce, 2010), in Project Underwater Wallace's requests for more information were met with suspicion and resistance. This again had to do with the prominence of the secondary risks the project team experienced and their attribution of responsibility for risk to external stakeholders. This led the project team to try minimizing the risks associated with those stakeholders. It may have led to their decision not to share sensitive information with the groups they considered to be a source of risk. This is consistent with the assumption that teams or team members make strategic decisions about sharing information, that is, what information to share, with whom, and how (Wittenbaum et al., 2004).

Our findings have important implications for risk management in projects. The complexity and sensitivity of risks in Project Underwater, including the fact that the primary risks were often coupled to secondary political risks, created a context in which the central project team felt that their identity was under threat. Consequently they were inclined to attribute responsibility for increasing the project's risks to other stakeholders. Additionally, there was much conflict about how risks should be handled. Finally, the project team engaged in specific actions to ward off the stakeholders they considered responsible for inflicting risks on the project. This course of events was potentially detrimental to the success of the project and even for the safety of the tunnel. Since identity threat can explain negative behavior in project stakeholders, we conclude that project management should be aware of circumstances in which identity threat can surface. Although it is probably hard to avoid identity threat altogether, management could try to make project actors deal with any identity threat constructively. For instance, individuals and groups under identity threat can use cognitive strategies, such as categorizing groups into a new ingroup

(Blanz et al., 1998) that in this case would comprise all the stakeholders in the project.

Our findings on risk discourse indicate how important it is for project managers and other stakeholders to be aware of the way risks (as well as other important issues in a project) are discussed, because this may signal the quality of relationships between stakeholders in a project. If project leaders are attentive to such signals, it may be possible to improve cooperation and prevent damage to the project outcome. The power of discourse should not be overestimated, however: for leaders it is important not only to show commitment to the project in their use of language (e.g., Burke et al., 2010; Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Fiol, 2002), but also in their behavior. If there is incongruence between words and actions, further deterioration of relationships becomes even more likely. In other words, project leaders should make sure that they "walk the talk" (Van Dyck, Dimitrova, De Korne, & Hiddema, 2013).

The primary strength of our research is that we could show the developmental process of risk discourse and cooperation between stakeholders. Our data collection period encompassed several months of the project. Data sources were a combination of (outsider's) observations of team meetings and interviews with the actors involved (insiders) reflecting on these meetings. These characteristics of our study are extremely valuable since the different types of data complemented and confirmed each other, increasing the reliability of our findings, and enabling us to analyze the evolution of risk discourse through the project (Langley, 1999). The quality of data analysis was enhanced by the interaction between the first and second authors. In our frequent discussions on data interpretations we came to a deeper understanding of the role of social identity processes in risk handling in projects. However, because the project team was our main

interest, as it was most suitable for exploring identity threat, we could not always investigate the risk discourse taking place outside it. Additionally, in this qualitative study, we cannot draw inferences about causality. Instead, we emphasize that there is a strong interplay between social identity processes, risk discourse, and cooperation with stakeholders.

In conclusion, the findings of this study enhance our understanding of cooperation processes. Projects are complex endeavors in which social identity processes and discourse play an important role. Responsibility for risks is attributed both formally and informally to stakeholders. This occurs especially when attributing responsibility for risks to outsiders becomes an attractive proposition, for instance when there is a strong focus on risk prevention and a project team feels their identity is threatened. Our findings suggest that it is not enough to have a formal risk management system in place; one must also pay attention to the way people discuss risks, specifically how different groups in a project talk about risks in relation to the other stakeholder groups. The time and energy spent on external attribution of responsibility, conflict, and withholding information, is likely to damage the efficiency of a project, which could add to the problems of delays and escalating costs that we touched upon in the introduction. It is therefore important to be aware of these processes and to act upon them whenever possible.